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Vernacular Languages in the Medieval Jiankang Empire

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Modern historians' conception of the ethnic and linguistic map of medieval China is inevitably framed by their understanding of subsequent historical and ideological developments regarding Chinese ethnicity and language. Only recently have consistent critical efforts been made to break down the monolithic construction of "Chineseness" and its opposite, the presumed "barbarian Other," that are deeply patterned by late imperial and modern nationalist ideologies. The field of critical Han studies has analyzed how terms and concepts such as "Han" or "Chinese" have a historical evolution, and cannot be easily mapped onto earlier periods.¹ When we look over the several thousand years of what is called "Chinese" history, the idea of a "Chinese" or a "Han" ethnicity as a distinct entity turns out to have been very relevant in some historical periods (especially the more recent past), but much less operative in others.

The early medieval period (roughly the second to the sixth century CE) is a period when ethnic concepts as well as political borders were very much in flux, and where modern, preconceived notions of "Han" or other ethnic groups must be applied with extreme caution. In fact, the very concept of an "ethnic group" is problematic, since it is a quite multi-layered idea, combining conceptions of physiognomy, genealogy, political allegiance, and a wide range of cultural attributes into a single construct. When historians begin with the presumption of a "Han" ethnic group, then the remaining "non-Han" or "minority" ethnic groups may seem to sort themselves into some sort of viable order, validating the use of ethnicity as an analytic category. Once we problematize the concept of "Han," however, these seemingly comfortable and familiar

¹ Thomas Mullaney et al., eds., *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

boundaries become much more elusive.² This essay presumes that we should be cautious about imposing the idea of "ethnicity," and instead deconstruct it into its component elements and look at each of them separately.

One of the most important component elements, and the subject of this investigation, is the role of vernacular languages. Because differences in speech have a very concrete role in the day-to-day functioning of social and political relations, they are perennially significant in understanding the evolution of class, geographic, and eventually ethnic distinctions. The political, social, and cultural system of medieval China was very much oral and personal. Personal face-to-face patronage ties dominated the military; oral and ritual performance dominated Buddhist and Daoist proselytizing and, eventually, imperial court performance; and oral culture had an enormous impact on poetry and music. The language, dialect, or accent in which these personal relationships and performances were conducted is therefore of critical importance in understanding the culture, society, and politics of the era. Unfortunately, historians of medieval China have rarely made any more than a casual classification of people into speakers of "Chinese" and speakers of "non-Chinese" languages. This distinction makes two very problematic presumptions: first, that there was a meaningful and well-understood dividing line between "Chinese" and "non-Chinese" languages; and, second, that the language differences between different Sinitic speakers were relatively small, a matter of pronunciation or "dialect," rather than the equivalent of differences between "languages."

The first presumption, that "Chinese" and "non-Chinese" is a meaningful distinction, has been reinforced by the work of modern linguists, who have reconstructed a Sinitic language family whose morphology and syntax were more closely related to that of Written Sinitic than were those of other language families. Within the region controlled by the Jiankang Empire (by which I mean the Three Kingdoms state of Wu, the Eastern Jin, and the Southern Dynasties),

² For example, Marc Abramson, *Ethnic Identity in Tang China* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), takes "ethnicity" as the primary lens for analyzing Tang era materials about cultural and linguistic differences, treating the concept of "Han" ethnicity as a given. For a critique of this approach, and a view closer to my own, see the review by Naomi Standen, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 72, no. 1 (2009): 202–4.

linguists have identified at least three other distinct language families: Tai, Miao-Yao, and Austroasiatic. However, because the Sinitic family is the only one represented by a written script, it is the only one subject to the intensive reconstruction efforts of historical phonology.³ As a result, the simple distinction between Sinitic and non-Sinitic languages and peoples has come to seem self-evident. However, as this article will show, evidence from medieval texts does not show any conceptualization of a Chinese/Sinitic “group” of vernacular languages that shared a special affinity, or which was sharply demarcated from other, non-Sinitic languages.⁴ Practically speaking, there was no recognized affinity between the Sinitic tongues that might have bound the hypothesized “Sinitic peoples” together as a linguistic, social, political, or ethnic unit.

The second presumption, that Sinitic speakers all shared the “same” basic language, is also problematic. Language families are not the same thing as languages; modern language families have many different distinct, mutually unintelligible vernacular languages in them, with no necessary sense of unity or commonality between their speakers.⁵ Similarly, it is clear from medieval texts that the various vernacular languages of what we now call the Sinitic language family were regarded as wholly distinct languages, and reflected separate cultures that were each important and meaningful in medieval society and politics. Historians and linguists have previously remarked on the distinction between early medieval northern and southern speech, but

³ Edwin G. Pulleyblank, *Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation in Early Middle Chinese, Late Middle Chinese, and Early Mandarin* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991); William H. Baxter, *A Handbook of Old Chinese Phonology* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992); Axel Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007).

⁴ The Sinitic language family was not demarcated as a group during the Han dynasty, either. The seminal work on the subject, the *Fangyan* 方言 by Yang Xiong 揚雄, covers a wide range of languages, including Wu and southern Yue tongues, that almost certainly were largely Austroasiatic, rather than Sinitic. Thus, it would be a mistake to translate the title of his book as “Dialects” (the modern sense of the term *fangyan*); it should instead be translated as something like “Regional Languages.”

⁵ For example, the Altaic family includes languages as diverse as Turkish, Mongolian, and Japanese. The Sinitic family, though often treated as a single language, is in fact “a group of related, mutually unintelligible languages.” See William O’Grady and John Archibald, *Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction, 4th edition* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003), 371–72.

they have tended to see this as a relatively small matter of pronunciation, dialect, or accent, rather than raising it to the level of “language” differences, an issue that will be addressed below.⁶ The further distinction between different southern Sinitic vernacular languages, and their complex relationship with other vernaculars, has received no attention at all.

To make sense of this problem, it is critical to understand the relationship between Written Sinitic and spoken languages. As is well known, Written Sinitic did not correspond to *any* spoken language; it was essentially a form of shorthand which did not reflect the way which people actually spoke, unless they were reading aloud or chanting from memory. For these functions there were glossing systems, systems for pronouncing Written Sinitic when it was read aloud. Glossing systems were the primary focus of medieval phonological scholars, and thus of modern ones as well. However, a glossing system is *not* a vernacular language; it is merely a pronunciation system for Written Sinitic. Finally, there were actual vernacular languages, each with their own morphology and syntax as well as their idiosyncratic phonological systems, all of which were distinct from one another as well as from Written Sinitic. If one were literate, and of scholarly inclination, one could develop a glossing system for Written Sinitic based on the phonology of any given vernacular language; several different ones existed in medieval times. However, a glossing system would be only a pale shadow of the full vernacular language, reflecting only its pronunciation, without any of its other complexities. To take an obvious and well-studied example, if all we knew about Old Japanese was how it glossed Written Sinitic, we would hardly begin to capture the rich totality of the spoken language.⁷ Sinitic vernacular languages were presumably somewhat closer to Written Sinitic in morphology and syntax than Japanese was, but none of them would have been very close. In terms of their relationship to one

⁶ Part of the problem is that Han dynasty and medieval scholars did not make any distinction between a “dialect” and a “language.” The distinction is problematic even for modern linguists, though mutual intelligibility is usually taken as a rough standard (O’Grady and Archibald, *Contemporary Linguistics*, 348). Whether terms such as *yan* 言 and *yu* 語 are translated as “dialect” or “language” is subjective and frequently dependent on the preconceptions about medieval linguistic diversity that scholars bring to the text.

⁷ Alexander Vovin, *A Descriptive and Comparative Grammar of Western Old Japanese, Part 1: Sources, Script and Phonology, Lexicon, Nominals* (Folkestone, Kent: Global Oriental, 2005), 24–26.

another, we must presume that medieval Sinitic vernaculars were at least as distinctive as are modern Chinese languages such as Cantonese and Minnan, and almost certainly a good deal more so, given that modern linguistic variety in China persists after fifteen hundred years' worth of efforts at unification.⁸

The most sensible assumption, therefore, is that there were many different vernacular languages in the Jiankang Empire, whether Sinitic or otherwise. This essay seeks to make a preliminary map of some of that linguistic diversity. It does not presume that we can make much progress towards re-constructing the pronunciation or grammar of medieval vernacular languages; instead, it seeks to determine the political and social roles these almost-forgotten tongues played. It begins by breaking down the long-standing dichotomy between north and south, which masks the much greater diversity that actually existed in the fifth and sixth centuries. It then proceeds to explore several of the Jiankang Empire's most socially and politically influential vernacular languages: the elite vernacular at the capital, the Sinitic languages of the Wu and Chu peoples, and several "marginalized" languages of the far south. In conclusion, it contemplates the relationship between these vernacular languages and the much more multi-faceted idea of ethnicity, concluding that the Wu and Chu peoples appear to have at least as good, if not a better claim to be "ethnic" groups in the medieval period than do the "marginalized" or "minority" groups.

Northern and Southern

With regards to language and ethnicity, as in so many affairs of the early medieval period, the situation under the Northern Dynasties has been much better studied, and is often taken as paradigmatic for the medieval period as a whole. The evidence from northern authors suggests that there was a relatively clear distinction made between Sinitic and non-Sinitic languages (such as Xianbei), as well as between resident (Sinitic-speaking) and immigrant (generally non-Sinitic-speaking) peoples. By the sixth century, the ethnonym *Han* 漢 or *Hanren* 漢人 began to be used

⁸ These Chinese languages, though frequently referred to as "dialects," are universally understood by linguists to be fully-fledged languages; see discussion and footnoted sources in Thomas Mullaney, "Critical Han Studies: Introduction and Prolegomenon," *Critical Han Studies*, ed. Mullaney et al., 1–2; O'Grady and Archibald, *Contemporary Linguistics*, 348, 372.

to refer to those people believed to be descended from subjects of the Han empire, in order to distinguish them from the Xianbei and others who had migrated into the central regions in the post-Han era. The Han people are presumed to be native speakers of Sinitic vernaculars. The ethnonym was used by northern conquering groups in later eras, and eventually became the term adopted for the “Han Chinese” people of modern times.⁹ As a result, the Northern Dynasties discourse of language and ethnicity appears familiar, and seems to map readily onto the discourses of the Tang dynasty, later dynasties, and the modern Chinese state.

The homology only works, however, if we ignore everything south of the Huai River. While many medieval southerners would be considered “Han Chinese” from a modern perspective, none of them would ever have been termed a *Hanren* in early medieval times, from either a northern or a southern perspective. From the northern perspective, furthermore, the people of the Southern Dynasties did not speak the same language as those of the north; they spoke an uncivilized, barbarian tongue. The point is made quite clearly in a passage in Yang Xuanzhi’s *Luoyang qielan ji* (Record of the Temples of Luoyang), in which one Yang Yuanshen 楊元慎 launches into a lengthy anti-southern diatribe. In one section, he discusses southern languages as follows: “Although Qin survivors and Han convicts mixed in using some civilized speech, nonetheless the difficult languages of Min and Chu cannot be changed 雖復秦餘漢罪雜以華音，復閩楚難言不可 改變。”¹⁰ Yang acknowledges here that there were a certain number of people in the south who spoke a “civilized language,” that is, a northern one, but he saw them as a tiny minority of exiles awash in a sea of barbarian peoples, whom they were unable to influence.

The language of these “other peoples” is discussed by Wei Shou, the author of the *History of the [Northern] Wei*, in his chapter on the southern regimes:

⁹ Mark Elliot, “Hushuo: The Northern Other and the Naming of the Han Chinese,” in *Critical Han Studies*, ed. Mullaney et al., 173–90; Yang Shaoyun, “Becoming Zhongguo, Becoming Han: Tracing and Reconceptualizing Ethnicity in Ancient North China, 770 BC–AD 581” (MA Thesis, National University of Singapore, 2007).

¹⁰ Yang Xuanzhi 楊銜之, *Luoyang qielan ji jiaozhu* 洛陽伽藍記校注, ed. Fan Xiangyong 范祥雍 (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978) 2.117-19.

The officials of the central plains exclaim that Jiangdong people (i.e., the southerners) are all acting like badgers, and said they were akin to foxes and badgers. As for the Ba, Shu, Man, Liao, Xi, Li, Chu, and Yue [peoples]: their languages are as dissimilar as the sounds of birds and the cries of fowl, their preferences all as different as those of monkeys, snakes, fish, and turtles.¹¹

If we look at the list of “dissimilar” southern languages in Wei Shou’s list, the Chu language would now be considered essentially Sinitic, while the others would be classified as belonging to one of the three aforementioned non-Sinitic language families: Yue would be identified as Austroasiatic, while the others might be considered Tai or Miao-Yao, or perhaps some mix of elements from several of the four families. However, Wei Shou makes no such distinction; he was not a linguist, nor was he capable of, nor necessarily even interested in, making detailed scientific distinctions between language groups and peoples. For Wei Shou, as for others, the primary divisions between people were political and cultural, an ideological map that did *not* fall along the same lines as a modern ethno-linguistic one. Notably, for him the Sinitic languages do not form a “group” straddling the north-south divide; instead, he understood northern Sinitic languages such as his own to be “civilized” (*hua* 華), while southern languages, whether Sinitic or otherwise, were “barbarian,” foreign, and odd. It is also important to note that Wei Shou is clearly *not* just saying that southern pronunciation was different from northern; instead, he understands southerners to speak in many different languages which, due to their bestial nature, were more akin to one another than to any northern language.

Our ability to grasp the significance of this point is hampered by the development of a strong conceptual dualism of “north and south,” which became dominant only with the effort to justify “unification,” that is, the Sui conquest of the Jiankang Empire in 589 CE. The north-south dichotomy was often framed as one of complementarity (e.g. north as martial, *wu* 武, and south as literary/civilian, *wen* 文), but it was occasionally understood as northern superiority and dominance, depending on the context and perspective of the author.¹² Either way, the north-south

¹¹ *Wei shu* 96: 2093.

¹² Tian Xiaofei, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang* (Harvard 2007), 310–66.

dichotomy collapsed a very diverse linguistic and cultural world into a simple binary, one which dominated the historiography of the Sui and early Tang period and thereby colored the vast majority of written materials about the fifth and sixth centuries, as well as all subsequent interpretations of the period.

In the case of languages, the clearest example of this attempt to reduce diversity to a simple binary is in the famous essay on phonology by Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–591). Yan opens his discourse with a discussion of the great variety of vernacular languages passed down from Spring and Autumn and Warring States times to the Han Empire, and catalogued in Yang Xiong’s work, *Regional Languages* (*Fangyan* 方言). He then rapidly shifts to the narrower topic of the proper glosses for written characters, and how these have been influenced by local languages in the post-Han era. As a result, he writes, each work on phonology “had its own local flavor, and they alternated in criticism and ridicule of each other 各有土風, 遞相非笑.” To make sense of this complex situation, Yan forthrightly declares that he will concern himself only with the glossing systems of the two capitals, Luoyang and Jiankang, and ignore all the others.¹³

It is important to understand here what Yan is and is not saying. First of all, Yan is interested solely in how regional languages have influenced glossing systems; he is not saying that this effect is the *only* difference between regional languages, and we would be reckless to assume so. Second, Yan is making a conscious choice to ignore all of the other regional languages in favor of the two most elite ones, the ones which had the greatest amount of scholarly support, and, as we know historically, the ones likely to have been the most similar across the north-south divide. In other words, Yan’s objective is to greatly simplify the complexity of local glossing traditions down to just a northern and a southern one, and then compare only those two.

It required but one more step to blur the differences even between Yan’s “standard” northern and southern tongues and join those two glossing systems into a single one. This task was accomplished by the *Qieyun* 切韻, compiled by Lu Fayan 陸法言 in 601 CE. As his preface

¹³ Yan Zhitui 顏之推, *Yanshi jiaxun jijie* 顏氏家訓集解 (Family Instructions for the Yan Clan: Collected Annotations), ed. Wang Liqi 王利器 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), 529.

makes clear, Lu consulted heavily with Yan Zhitui and other phonological scholars, all of whom used the glosses of either the Jiankang or the northern (Luoyang–Ye) metropolitan elites, and he intentionally disregarded variations from other regional languages.¹⁴ We may take the fact that Jiankang and Luoyang glossing systems could be readily synthesized as evidence that the vernacular languages upon which they were based had differences only in pronunciation or accent, rather than more substantive linguistic differences. But there is some countervailing evidence, since, prior to the Sui conquest, the differences between the two vernaculars were regarded as much more significant. For example, the *Liang shu* biography of the northern Ru scholar Lu Guang 盧廣 notes the following:

At that time among Ru scholars who had come from the north there was Cui Ling'en 崔靈恩, Sun Xiang 孫詳, and Jiang Xian 蔣顯; they all assembled disciples and gave lectures, but their enunciation and phrases 音辭 were crude and clumsy; only Guang's speech and arguments were pure and *ya*, not like a northern person.¹⁵

The fact that northerners were critiqued for their syntax and morphology as well as their enunciation suggests that the difference between at least some variants of northern and southern speech were a good deal more serious than Yan Zhitui and others were willing to admit. Simply put, we cannot be sure of the extent of the difference between the northern and southern vernacular languages that contributed their glosses to the *Qieyun*.

What we do know for sure is that, by Sui times, there was a substantial ideological motivation to de-emphasize these linguistic differences, and then eliminate them. The effort by a small group of Sui-dynasty phonological scholars to unify northern and southern glossing systems required the purposeful and openly-declared denial of the pronunciation systems of all of the other, far less prestigious and less scholastically-supported vernacular languages, not to

¹⁴ E. G. Pulleyblank, *Middle Chinese: A Study in Historical Phonology* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983), pp. 133–36.

¹⁵ *Liang shu* (History of the Liang Dynasty) 48: 678.

mention the denial of an unknown amount of variation in their morphology and syntax. If we are to make much sense of the linguistic and cultural world of the Jiankang Empire, we will have to read back into it the understanding that Yan Zhitui and Lu Fayan had: that is was linguistically far more polyglot than they and their contemporaries wished to address or account for.

As will be shown below, medieval linguistic diversity in the south had several important features that made it unlike the better-studied case in the north. First, the distinctions made at the time do not suggest that there was a single “southern” Sinitic vernacular, but numerous different southern vernacular languages, each with its own groups of speakers, regional base, and probably distinctive oral traditions. Languages that we would now classify as Sinitic, such as Wu and Chu vernaculars, were clearly understood by southerners to be “different” languages, just as distinct from one another as were the languages which are now identified as non-Sinitic, or for that matter the languages of the north.¹⁶ Second, the Sinitic vernacular languages were messy admixtures, with long histories of borrowing from other, often non-Sinitic languages. As a result, they tended to blur into all of the other language families without sharp boundaries. There is no evidence that the speakers of Sinitic vernaculars were thought of as a “group,” nor was there any term or concept equivalent to “Chinese” (or Sinitic) that mapped onto vernacular languages in a way that corresponds to the modern conception of the Sinitic language family. The situation is thus quite unlike the north, where the concept and the terminology of *Hanren* seems to map onto something rather like a proto-ethnic group with a distinctive language, an apparent direct historical evolution into the reality of modern China, and a comfortably well-defined non-Sinitic Other.¹⁷ In the south, by comparison, the situation was much less neat; as a result, it is also more intellectually and conceptually challenging to comprehend.

Jiankang Elite Vernacular

The southern vernacular for which we have by far the most information, and which has received virtually all of the modern linguistic and scholarly attention, is the one which was spoken at

¹⁶ Other identifiable vernacular language groups that may have been predominantly Sinitic include Jing-Chu (central Yangzi), Ba, and Shu (upper Yangzi); I will not explore these here.

¹⁷ Elliot, “Hushuo”; Yang, *Becoming Zhongguo*, 61–99.

capital and court, the one thought to be the “standard” or “correct” language, the pronunciation which literary men described as *ya* 雅, “elegant,” or *zheng* 正, “correct.” It was understood to have preserved the pronunciation system of early fourth-century Luoyang, which was brought to the south with the migration of a good deal of the Western Jin elite, including the ruling Sima clan, which founded the Eastern Jin. In practice, the language probably had changed some over the subsequent two hundred years in exile, as did its sister tongue back in Luoyang. I will call this southern elite language Jiankang Elite Vernacular (JEV).

Jiankang Elite Vernacular is tacitly thought of as *the* primary language of the Jiankang Empire, for two reasons. First, it was probably the default social language of most of the empire’s literate men, even in cases where it was their second language, rather than their native tongue. As a result, it is not referred to in texts as a distinctive “language”; it is simply taken for granted. Second, it was the preoccupation of early medieval philologists and etymologists, and thus formed the basis for the most important medieval glossing system, the “southern variant” of what Pulleyblank calls Early Medieval Chinese, but which is more precisely called the *Qieyun* system. As noted previously, the *Qieyun* reflects a somewhat artificial glossing system which combined the northern and southern urban elite systems; a more purely “JEV-based” southern pronunciation is believed to be reflected in the glosses used by several other, pre-conquest texts.¹⁸ As a result, we have far more information about the glossing system and pronunciation of JEV than for any other medieval southern vernacular language.

Contrary to both medieval and modern scholarly preoccupation, however, Jiankang Elite Vernacular was certainly *not* the primary spoken language of the Jiankang Empire; it was merely the most prestigious and the best recorded. In fact, it was a rather peculiar, minority tongue, probably a minority even in the city of Jiankang itself, which had well over a million people, most of whom were not literate and were not descended from elite northern families, and who would have often prized other ways of speaking, according to their background, social class, and profession. The lower Yangzi area was actually dominated by two other Sinitic vernacular language groups: Wu and Chu. We are powerless to reconstruct the details of these languages’

¹⁸ Pulleyblank, *Middle Chinese*, 129–61.

pronunciation and syntax, but that should not make them any less important for how we understand the politics of medieval oral culture and ethnic discourse.

Wu vernacular

Wu vernacular had its roots in a complex blend of Sinitic and Austroasiatic elements in the pre-Qin states of Wu and Yue, but by the end of the Han Empire it had probably become much more heavily Sinitic. Wu vernacular dominated the capital and court of the Three Kingdoms state of Wu, developing a proud elite and scholarly tradition. Wu vernacular included particular, distinctive turns of phrase and pronunciation that were not known in northern tongues.¹⁹ Following the conquest by Jin, leading figures of the Wu elite continued to defend the culture and history of the Wu state against the arrogance and condescension of northerners. For example, Lu Ji declared in a letter to his uncle that the pre-Qin state of Wu had "especially many men of surpassing ability. Now, although our state has been destroyed, we are in no way inferior to the *huaxia* region (that is, the central plains around Luoyang)."²⁰

Following the early fourth-century crisis of the Jin court and the emigration of many elite Luoyang families to the old Wu capital of Jiankang, the revived "Eastern" Jin dynasty oversaw the revival of the southern empire that Wu had founded. The northern emigres preserved their spoken tongue, which evolved into JEV, and maintained a tight grip on civilian court appointments for several generations, but they eventually were compelled to accept the local Wu elites into high society. As a result, the language of the Wu elites retained considerable prestige, and some members of the Wu elite proudly maintained their speech traditions into the fifth and sixth centuries, rather than succumb to the prestige of JEV. The *Songshu* (History of the Song Dynasty) biography of Gu Chen 顧琛, a native of Wujun, notes that he and his literary companions "did not change their Wu vernacular speech."²¹ The same was sometimes the case

¹⁹ David Knechtges, "Sweet-peel Orange or Southern Gold? Regional Identity in Western Jin Literature," in *Studies in Early Medieval Chinese Literature and Cultural History: In Honor of Richard B. Mather and Donald Holzman*, ed. Paul Kroll and David Knechtges (Provo, Utah: T'ang Studies Society, 2003), 49–51.

²⁰ Translation adapted from Knechtges, "Sweet-peel Orange," 47.

²¹ *Song shu* 81.2078–9; see also *Nan shi* (History of the Southern Dynasties) 35.920.

for locals with less impressive pedigrees. For example, the ancestors of the illiterate general Wang Jingze were lower-class migrants into the Wu region, but after several generations of intermarrying with the locals they spoke the local language. After Jingze rose to the height of power under the Qi Emperors Wu and Ming in the 480s and 490s, he remained notably informal in his manners, and “received gentry and commoners alike using Wu vernacular.”²²

Because Wu vernacular had a lengthy tradition of educated and elite lineages, there was a well-established scholarly system of Wu glosses for Written Sinitic, which offered an alternative to the much better-recorded JEV glosses. Guo Pu in the early fourth century drew on a good deal of Wu vernacular (his native tongue, which he called Jiangdong speech 江東語) for the glosses he used to annotate works such as the *Fangyan* and the *Erya* 尔雅 (Approaching Correctness).²³ A fascinating later example is the monk Sanghabhara, a native of Funan (in modern Cambodia) whose native tongue would have been a variant of Old Khmer, but who was literate in Sanskrit. Hearing of the prestige and patronage opportunities in Jiankang, he traveled there by sea, apprenticed with a senior Indian monk, learned Written Sinitic (and probably also at least one vernacular Sinitic tongue), and eventually undertook translation projects in the early sixth century. His Chinese collaboration partners were Wu natives, and when the team transcribed Sanskrit proper names they used both Wu and JEV glosses for characters, showing that both possibilities were respectable at the time.²⁴

Following the Sui conquest, however, the Wu glosses all but disappeared. They appear to have been wholly disregarded in the effort to develop the unified glossing system of the *Qieyun*.

²² *Nan Qi shu* (History of the Southern Qi Dynasty) 26.484. Pulleyblank, *Lexicon*, 151–52, suggests that this Wu vernacular is still extant as a “ghost” in modern Min languages, which were historically descended from the speech of Wu aristocrats who moved south into Fujian, and whose spoken tongue affected, and largely over-wrote, local Vietic vernaculars. In other regions of the south the immigration came from speakers of something closer to JEV.

²³ He Da’an 何大安, “Lun Guo Pu Jiangdongyu de mingyi 论郭璞江东语的名义 (On the Meaning of Guo Pu’s Term ‘Jiangdong Language’),” in *In Honor of Mei Tsu-Lin: Studies on Chinese Syntax and Morphology*, ed. Alain Peyraube and Sun Chaofen (Paris: Ecole des Hautes Etudes En Sciences Sociales, 1999), 49–56.

²⁴ Pulleyblank, *Lexicon*, 150–51; South W. Coblin, “Notes on Sanghabhara’s Mahamayuri Transcriptions,” in *Cahiers de linguistique — Asie orientale*, 19.2 (1990): 195–251.

More fundamentally, to have used them would have reflected a lingering Wu “patriotism” which would have been unacceptable in the new political climate. In Japan, the term 吳音 (Mandarin *Wuyin*; Japanese *Go'on*) came to refer, not to the old Wu glosses, but to “southern” glosses, meaning JEV.²⁵

Chu vernacular

The other prominent spoken language in the lower Yangzi region was Chu vernacular. “Chu” here refers to the region of “eastern Chu” or “Huai-Chu,” the area of Huainan and Huaibei stretching from the Yangzi all the way up into Shandong. In the Spring and Autumn period the language of this region had been a mix of Sinitic and eastern Yi 夷 (thought to be an Austroasiatic language). In the Warring States period it came under the dominion of the central Yangzi state of Chu, and thereby may have picked up Tai and Miao-Yao influences as well.²⁶ Like Wu vernacular, it undoubtedly had become a good deal more Sinitic by the end of the Han empire, but it was still clearly distinct; the aforementioned comments from both Yang Xuanzhi and Wei Shou prove that Chu language was considered just as barbaric and odd-sounding as any of the non-Sinitic languages of other marginalized peoples of the south.²⁷ One basis for this judgment may have indeed been its sound quality; evidence suggests that the southern languages had more tones than the northern ones (as they do to this day), which may have suggested the “birdlike” sounds Wei Shou ascribes to them.²⁸ The more important element, I would argue, is that they were all considered to be lower-class and unlearned, and thereby comparable to the “languages” of wild creatures.

²⁵ Pulleyblank, *Middle Chinese*, 154.

²⁶ E. G. Pulleyblank, “The Chinese and Their Neighbors in Prehistoric and Early Historic Times,” in *The Origins of Chinese Civilization*, ed. David Keightley (University of California Press, 1983), 427–29, 437–42, 460.

²⁷ Guo Pu also mentions the continued existence of the Huai-Chu vernacular: He Da’an, “Lun Guo Pu,” 49–56.

²⁸ Pang-hsin Ting, “Tonal Evolution and Tonal Reconstruction in Chinese,” in *New Horizons in Chinese Linguistics*, ed. C-T James Huang and Y. H. Audrey Li (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 141–60; Axel Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), 2.

Chu vernacular never gained the political and cultural prestige that Wu vernacular had in the Three Kingdoms period, and it was always regarded as lower-class and uncouth. For example, Wang Dun (266–324), the ambitious general of the early Eastern Jin period, was one of the Wangs of Langye, which would go on to become one of the great aristocratic clans of the medieval era. Nonetheless, according to the *Shishuo xinyu* (Age-old Accounts and New Sayings), “when he was young (in the 280s) he had the reputation of being a country bumpkin (*tianshe* 田舍), and his speech also sounded like that of Chu.”²⁹

Following the dramatic successes of the Northern Headquarters Army (*beifubing* 北府兵) in the late fourth century, and stretching all the way to the mid-sixth century, men from the eastern Chu region, sometimes just called “Chu boys” 楚子, dominated the military system of the Jiankang Empire.³⁰ As a result, Chu vernacular language was a very important force in southern military, political, and eventually imperial circles. Liu Yu, the founder of the Liu Song dynasty, was from Pengcheng, in the heart of the Huai-Chu region. He and his half-brother Daolian are explicitly noted as speaking Chu vernacular, and more than likely the same was true for all of the top men in his early alliance, all of whom hailed from the Huai-Chu region.³¹ Many of the top generals and provincial governors of the Liu-Song period were Chu men, including the Xiaos, the relatives and descendants of Liu Daolian’s mother (Yu’s stepmother) and the family of Xiao Daocheng, the founder of the Qi dynasty. Though each successive emperor brought in some fighting allies from other parts of the empire, as well as significant numbers of “late-crossing northerners,” the numerical preponderance of Huai-Chu men in the critical garrisons surrounding and protecting the capital and extending to the well-armed frontier with the north ensured their

²⁹ Liu Yiqing 劉義慶, *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 世說新語箋疏, ed. Yu Jiayi 余嘉錫 (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993), 13.1, 594; Richard Mather, trans., *Shih-shuo Hsin-yu: A New Account of Tales of the World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 322.

³⁰ Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, “Chuzi jituan yu jiangzuo zhengquan de zhuan yi 楚子集团与江左政权的转移 (The Chu Faction and the Transformation of Political Power South of the Yangzi),” in *Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi jiangyan lu* 魏晉南北朝史講演錄 (Lectures on the History of the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties) (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 1987), 172–92.

³¹ *Song shu* 52.1506; *Song shu* 51.1462.

predominance at all levels of the southern military up until the collapse of the Liang dynasty in the mid-sixth century. A typical example is Chen Bozhi, a native of Qiyang just south of Pengcheng, who served as a general and provincial governor in the early Liang period. He was illiterate, and his document clerk sometimes read materials to him in vernacular language (*kouyu* 口語), meaning Chu vernacular.³² Because Chu men like Liu Yu and Chen Bozhi dominated the southern military for 150 years, Chu vernacular language would have been the *lingua franca* of the military class, and thus of much of the Jiankang political system.

The significance of Chu language and culture has been especially ill-served by the routine emphasis on a north-south dichotomy, because Chu men could be identified as either southerners or as northerners, depending on context. In a classical sense, the term Chu was tied in a very essential way with the entire south, since the pre-Qin state of Chu, originally based in the central Yangzi, eventually seized control of the Huai valley and the Yangzi delta Wu-Yue region as well. As a result, it was standard to consider all of the territory from the Huai valley south to be "Chu," while the territory north of this line was considered the traditional "central states (*zhongguo*)."³³ This dividing line was re-created in the medieval period, since it was the approximate border between the Jiankang Empire and the north from the mid-fourth to the mid-sixth century. Thus, it makes perfect sense, both geographically and politically, for Wei Shou (a northerner) to classify Chu people in with other southern linguistic and cultural groups. The "classical" sense of Chu was sometimes used by northerners with a pejorative intent, however, since it lumped the Wu and Jiankang elites into the same basket with the rougher, less respected Chu men.

From the perspective of those Wu and Jiankang émigré elites, on the other hand, Chu men were frequently lumped together with men from the Luoyang and Guanzhong regions and described as "northerners." Chu men were in an important sense "northern" immigrants, because they had fled south to settle in the Yangzi River delta region, either due to pressure from armed groups based even further north, or due to the economic and political attractions of Jiankang. Wu

³² *Liang shu* 20: 312.

³³ For example, *Han shu* (History of the Han Dynasty) 27: 1463.

elites described these Chu migrants as “rough” or “coarse” (*cang* 儻), a term they also routinely applied to lower-class men from the Luoyang and Guanzhong regions, and they used binomes such as “coarse Chu” (*cang Chu* 儻楚) and “heterogenous Chu” (*za Chu* 雜楚) to refer pejoratively to virtually any fighting men, or any lower-class men, or simply all men not from Wu.³⁴ In short, men from Chu do not fit easily into either the “northern” or the “southern” conceptual box that later historiography would like to put them into. They came from a region which was geographically, linguistically, and culturally quite different from both the Luoyang region and the Wu region, and they occupied a drastically different social sphere than men from either.

One final question about Chu vernacular language is whether it ever developed an elite literary style with a glossing system for Written Sinitic, as Wu vernacular did. There was certainly a well-developed tradition of glosses for Written Sinitic that were identified as “Chu” glosses, based on the prosody of the *Chu Verses*. Liu Xie, in the *Wenxin diaolong*, comments on this tradition, saying: “The *Chu Verses* express Chu [pronunciation], so the errors in its finals (i.e. rhymes) are very many. Now Zhang Hua (232–300), in discussing finals, said that Lu Ji (author of the *Wenfu*) used a lot of Chu [sounds].... One can say that he held on to the remaining sounds of Qu Yuan, and lost the correct tones of the Yellow Bell.”³⁵ Liu Xie had somewhat conservative preferences, and, like many of his predecessors reaching back to Han times, he saw Chu poetic traditions as improper, decadent, and somewhat uncivilized. There was nonetheless a vigorous medieval scholarly tradition surrounding the prosody of the *Chu Verses*, reflected by the fact that there are five texts listed in the *Suishu* bibliography with the title *Pronunciation of the Chu*

³⁴ Yu Jiayi 余嘉锡, “Shi cang Chu 释儻楚 (Explanation of the Term “Coarse Chu”),” in *Han Wei Liang Jin Nanbeichao shi congkao* 漢魏兩晉南北朝史叢考 (Collected Studies on the History of the Han, Wei, Two Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties) (Beijing: Guojia tushuguan chubanshe, 2010), 173–75.

³⁵ Liu Xie, *Wenxin diaolong: Dragon Carving and the Literary Mind*, trans. Yang Guobin (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2003), Chapter 33: “Prosody,” section 33.4, pp. 470–71. The translation is my own. Lu Ji was in fact a paragon of Wu culture; this is likely to be a case in which Zhang Hua had used the term “Chu” in a broad sense to mean “southern,” rather than the more specific sense of “Huai-Chu.” However, Liu Xie may not have been aware of, or much concerned with, the distinction.

Verses (*Chuci yin* 楚辭音). The most important was by the Sui-era monk Daoqian 道騫, “who was good at reading aloud and able to do so in Chu pronunciation, his initials and finals clear and precise. To this day the tradition of the *Chu Verses* is entirely in the sound of old master Qian.”³⁶

These glosses, however, would have to be considered “Old Chu” glosses, a scholastic effort to duplicate the pronunciation of pre-Qin times. We have no way of knowing the relationship of this glossing tradition to what we might call the “Middle Chu” vernacular pronunciation of the fifth and sixth centuries.³⁷ By that time, the most influential speakers of Chu vernacular were unscholarly, often illiterate military men like Liu Yu and Chen Bozhi. Those that got much classical education, like Xiao Daocheng, founder of the Qi dynasty, probably also learned Jiankang Elite Vernacular and accepted its glosses as standard; there’s no evidence that they developed a literate tradition based on their own vernacular.

It is also the case that Jiankang elites, especially those from Wu, routinely demeaned Chu vernacular language along with the men who spoke it, and did not treat it as if it had any educated traditions. One example is the use of the binome “Chu and Xia” to refer to an improperly “vernacularized” glossing of a text by inadequately educated men of either northern or southern persuasion.³⁸ A letter written by Lu Chui, a native of Wu, to Xu Mian, the leading Ru scholar of the Liang period, says: “The northerners Sun Xiang and Jiang Xian, when conducting oral drills of the classics, in pronunciation offer “Chu and Xia,” so that the student-disciples do not come to them.”³⁹ We know from the passage quoted previously about Sun and Jiang that they

³⁶ *Sui shu* (History of the Sui Dynasty) 35: 1055–56.

³⁷ So, for example, an account of the Qingshu Hall 清暑殿 in 396 refers to the “Chu” pronunciation of the characters, but we have no way of knowing whether that was an erudite classical *Chuci*-styled pronunciation or one more closely related to the Chu vernacular of the time; *Song shu* 31.903; *Jin shu* (History of the Jin Dynasty) 9.241–2.

³⁸ Yu Jiayi, “Shi cang Chu,” 176–77.

³⁹ *Liang shu* 48: 678–79. See other examples of this usage in *Wei shu* 91: 1963–4/*Bei shi* (History of the Northern Dynasties) 34:1280–81; *Sui shu* 76: 1745; Lu Deming 陆德明, *Jingdian shiwen* 经典释文 (Explanation of the Words of the Classics) (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985) 1/1.

were noted for their “crude and clumsy” speech which was not “pure and *ya*.”⁴⁰ For Wu elites, reading a text with a “Chu and Xia” pronunciation was evidence of a lack of education and refinement. Our evidence is incomplete, and certainly biased, but it suggests that there was not a well-developed or prestigious scholarly tradition based on early medieval Chu vernacular.⁴¹

“Marginalized” vernaculars

Medieval texts have abundant references to politically marginalized peoples (often tagged by the English word “barbarian”). They are usually identified with rugged upland terrain, but would have included a significant mix of lowland fugitives who had fled into the hills as a result of war, exploitation (including enslavement), or in-migration by other, more powerful groups.⁴² These groups lacked literary traditions, and relatively few of them rose to prominent positions in the Jiankang Empire, so Sinitic textual sources have almost no direct references to their vernacular languages. Instead, they refer to these people using a variety of what I would call “pseudo-ethnic” terms, such as Man 蠻, Li 俚, or Lao 僚. There is no reason to believe that the medieval writers who used these terms were very aware of, much less careful about, the existence of linguistic families, genealogical histories, or other ethnographic distinctions, nor is there any reason to believe that the people so identified had any sense of unity or ethnic identity amongst themselves. The effort to match terms of this sort to modern ethnic classifications is a modern

⁴⁰ Their northern “Xia” speech was considered by southern elites to be “muddied” due to the influence of the Turko-Mongol tongues of the Sarbi; see An-king Lim, *A Sinitic Historical Phonology: Phonological Restructuring of Written Chinese under the 5th-Century Turkic Sinification* (Taipei: Institute of Linguistics, Academia Sinica, 2010).

⁴¹ This is not to say that there was no pride in being “Chu,” or even a sort of proto-nationalism about being “Chu” akin to that of men from Wu. Huan Xuan’s selection of “Chu” as the name for his dynasty (402–404) was probably as much a bid for the allegiance of Huai-Chu fighting men in the Northern Headquarters Army as it was a nod to his central Yangzi base. Poetic interest in the *Chu Verses* also remained lively, especially in the early sixth century, though its relationship to a Chu or southern-based identity is hard to measure.

⁴² For a broad discussion of these sorts of groups and their relationship with states and dominant peoples, see James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009).

project which has little to do with the lived experience of people in early medieval East Asia, or what they were doing when they wrote things down.⁴³

The most intensively-studied of these pseudo-ethnic terms is 越, transcribed as *yue* in modern Mandarin, *viet* in Vietnamese. The term in modern times refers to the Vietnamese people and nation, who have a long-standing interest in defining themselves not only as a distinctive and cohesive ethnic group of great antiquity, but also as a group sharply demarcated from the "Chinese," their colonial oppressors. As a result, the term is often represented as possessing a level of ethnic and linguistic specificity far beyond what it possibly could have had.⁴⁴ As numerous scholars have demonstrated, the term *Yue* was used in Sinitic texts to refer to a very wide range of things, of which the two most significant were: (1) a powerful state based in northern Zhejiang in the pre-Qin period, and (2) a wide range of peoples scattered all down the southeastern coast of mainland East Asia, from Zhejiang south to the Red River delta. These people were understood to be politically marginal or "barbarian"; they were broadly characterized as having short hair and tattoos, living in stilt houses, and practicing some form of shifting or swidden agriculture.⁴⁵ However, because the epithet "Yue" also signaled a kinship (however fictive) with a powerful classical state, it was opportunistically taken up by numerous later would-be rulers throughout the region as a proud political mantle.⁴⁶ Thus, the term *Yue*,

⁴³ Stevan Harrell, "The History of the History of the Yi," in *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, ed. Stevan Harrell (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 63–91.

⁴⁴ For a cogent analysis and deconstruction of this problem, see Michael Churchman, "Before Chinese and Vietnamese in the Red River Plain: The Han-Tang Period," *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 4 (2010): 25–37.

⁴⁵ The political and cultural role of the Yue in the pre-Han period is discussed in Heather Peters, "Tattooed Faces and Stilt Houses: Who Were the Ancient Yue?" *Sino-Platonic Papers* No. 17 (1990), and Eric Henry, "The Submerged History of Yue," *Sino-Platonic Papers* 176 (2007).

⁴⁶ Churchman, "Before Chinese and Vietnamese," 29. Notable examples of the use of the epithet "Yue" in a kingly or imperial title include, in the Guangdong region, Zhao Tuo's Nan Yue state in the third century BC; Li Bi's declaration of himself as Emperor of Yue in the mid-sixth century CE; Feng Lin in the mid-eighth century; and Liu Yan (briefly) in the early tenth century. The tenth-century states of Wu-Yue (in Zhejiang), Min-Yue (in Fujian), and, of course, Da Yue/Dai Viet (in Jiaozhi/Annam), all drew on the historical legacy of Yue in choosing their names.

rather like the terms *Wu* and *Chu*, was somewhat ambiguous: politically, it signaled membership in the wider Sinitic family of states by linking to a powerful Warring States polity; yet at the same time it continued to represent a culture and a people that were widely regarded as not wholly civilized.

Linguistically, the term *yue* is often presumed to correspond to speakers of languages in the Austroasiatic family, but again, we must always keep in mind that medieval authors were not precise about how they used the term. To my knowledge, there is not a single clear reference to any particular individual speaking a "Yue language" in any medieval Chinese text; there are just a few generic references, like that of Wei Shou, which lump Yue in with other very diverse peoples and languages and describe them as making bird or animal noises. On the other hand, by reconstructing backwards from Sino-Vietnamese (a term referring to the large corpus of Sinitic loan-words into modern Vietnamese), John Phan has shown that there existed in medieval Jiaozhi (the region of modern northern Vietnam) a distinctive language which he calls "Annamese Middle Chinese," a Sinitic language which differed from those in the Yangzi valley and which likely had a considerable admixture of words and sounds from other local, non-Sinitic languages. While some of the speakers of this language were descended from northern migrants, others had learned the language in order to gain status, since its speakers dominated the political system, were better-tied to the metropolitan elite at Jiankang, and were more likely to be literate in Written Sinitic.⁴⁷ The same motivations would have driven people in the lower Yangzi region to learn Jiankang Elite vernacular (if they wanted to become civil servants and/or marry into the metropolitan elite) or Chu vernacular (if they joined the military). Medieval Jiaozhi offers us a fairly well-reconstructed example of the situation that surely prevailed in other provincial parts of the Jiankang empire: local Sinitic languages functioned side-by-side with non-Sinitic languages, blending and borrowing from one another, with a considerable gradation of status and

⁴⁷ John Phan, "Reimagining 'Annam': A New Analysis of Sino-Viet-Muong Linguistic Contact," *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 4 (2010): 3–24. These speakers of Annamese Middle Chinese would later (in the tenth-eleventh centuries) shift to speaking the local, non-Sinitic language, bringing a good deal of their vocabulary and pronunciation with them, once the region became dominated by local military men and independent of northern regimes.

prestige that tended to favor vernaculars that were more Sinitic over those that were less Sinitic, and those that were metropolitan over those that were provincial.

These insights help us to make sense of a very unambiguous and interesting reference to the Xi language. The Xi people are identified in medieval sources as living in the hills of the Nanling 南嶺range, in southern Jiangxi and Hunan and northern Guangdong, an area which saw tremendous population growth through migration beginning in the late Han period.⁴⁸ Depending on the orthography, the character used for the Xi people (奚, 溪, 僖) can also mean “a slave” or “a mountain creek,” so it is not so clearly a linguistic or proto-ethnic marker as it is a status and/or geographical term, perhaps akin to the English term “hillbilly.” It could be used as a slur in the epithet “Xi dog,” (*xi gou* 奚狗), but it is also occasionally used in the phrase “Xi boys,” (*xizi* 僖子) which parallels the term “Chu boys” and refers to Nanling-area fighting men whose prowess was begrudgingly respected. “Xi boys” were drawn on as troops only occasionally in the fifth and early sixth centuries, but starting in the mid-sixth century (under the Chen dynasty) the chaos in Jiankang gave them an opportunity to recruit more local troops and fight their way to prominence in the Empire.⁴⁹

The anecdote in question regards Hu Xiezhi 胡諧之, a troop leader from Nanchang (Jiangxi) who was of “sleek and graceful bearing,” readily made friends, and benefited from his patronage ties to Xiao Daocheng, founder of the Qi dynasty (in 479). Daocheng sought to network his supporters through marital ties, but he “regarded the language of Hu Xiezhi’s family to have ‘Xi pronunciation 僖音’ and be incorrect 不正,” which made them hard to marry off to members of the Jiankang elite. So he sent several men from the palace to Xiezhi’s family to teach proper language to his sons and daughters, that is, to train them to speak in Jiankang Elite Vernacular. Two years later, the Emperor asked: “Is the minister’s family members’ language and pronunciation already correct, or not? 卿家人語音已正未?” Xiezhi replied, “The palace men

⁴⁸ Bai Cuiqin 白翠琴, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao minzu shi* 魏晉南北朝民族史 (History of Ethnic Groups of the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties) (Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe, 1996), 445–46.

⁴⁹ Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, “Liang-Chen shiqi shizu de moluo yu nanfang Manzu de xingqi 梁陳時期士族的沒落與南方蠻族的興起 (The Decline of Aristocratic Clans and the Rise of Southern Man Clans in the Liang-Chen Period),” in *Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi jiangyan lu* 魏晉南北朝史講演錄 (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 1987), 172–92.

were few and your minister's family members are many. Not only were they unable to gain correct pronunciation, but the palace men you sent are now able to speak the Xi language 非唯不能得正音，遂使宮人頓成僂語。” The Emperor gave a great laugh, and turned to tell it to his court officials.⁵⁰

How should we understand the vernacular language of Hu Xiezhi's household? The text here approaches it primarily as a problem of pronunciation, which may imply that the language was basically Sinitic, as Chu and Wu vernaculars were; however, we cannot presume that the historian was describing the situation very precisely. If we consider the broader history of migration and settlement in the Nanling foothills, it is quite probable that the majority of the people there, especially the politically active ones, were in fact either descended from migrants who spoke Sinitic vernaculars, or had been strongly influenced by them and learned their language. The political and social climate would have tended to push Nanling spoken languages in a Sinitic direction, just as had occurred with Wu and Chu vernaculars during the Han period. In other words, the “Xi language” of Hu Xiezhi's household was probably a heterogeneous polyglot language, roughly based on a Sinitic vernacular but with a heavy mixture of Tai, Miao-Yao, and/or Vietic elements, perhaps akin to what “Annamese Middle Chinese” was, and to what Chu or Wu vernacular had once been in the Warring States and early Han period.

One final point of interest is the response of the Emperor himself. Xiao Daocheng had risen up through the Jiankang military under the Liu-Song Emperors. His ancestors were originally Huai-Chu migrants into the military garrison town of Jingkou, just south of the Yangzi, and he had grown up and functioned as an adult in a multi-lingual environment which was probably dominated by varieties of Chu vernacular speech. He had also learned his letters, studied some of the classics, and probably gained a reasonable command of Jiankang Elite Vernacular, but he was still fully able to appreciate the military and political prowess of a very provincial man like Hu Xiezhi. Hu Xiezhi likewise may have picked up some ability in Jiankang Elite or Chu vernacular, but his family, raised in southern Jiangxi, still spoke a bastard tongue that needed a lot of polish before any of them was going to get anywhere in the very competitive

⁵⁰ *Nan shi* 47: 1176–77.

marriage market of the Jiankang elite. Xiao Daocheng's concern with the Hu family's speech is wholly practical; he himself had to master enough Jiankang Elite Vernacular to get ahead at court, and he expected Hu and his family to do likewise. Yet when his palace men are instead "corrupted" by the low vernacular of "hillbilly" speech, the failure of Jiankang Elite vernacular to take root is a source of great amusement to him. For Daocheng, there was nothing particularly invincible or inevitable about Jiankang Elite Vernacular and its pretensions. He lived and operated in a polyglot, multilingual world in which fighting men were respected, regardless of their tongue.

Conclusion

The Jiankang Empire was a linguistically complex society. Rather than being readily divisible into speakers of "Chinese" and "non-Chinese" languages, the Empire was home to multiple different vernacular language groups and oral traditions, each of which had complex and distinctive roots in both Sinitic and non-Sinitic linguistic families. The most salient distinction between these languages is that there was a fairly clear gradation in social prestige. At the top was Jiankang Elite vernacular, the language preserved by the descendants of the first wave of northern elite immigrants in the early fourth century, which dominated the cultural life of the capital and the concerns of phonologists, poets, and scholars. Wu vernacular, the prestige tongue of the old Three Kingdoms state of Wu, ranked second, with its own scholarly traditions and avid partisans. Chu vernacular lacked scholarly prestige and thus ranked a distant third, though it dominated the military class and much of the provincial government. Well behind all of these came a scattering of provincial vernaculars, some essentially Sinitic, others admixtures, others with little Sinitic influence. Within local circuits, there were gradations amongst these local tongues as well; in Jiaozhi, for example, Annamese Middle Chinese was a more prestigious tongue than any of the Austroasiatic vernaculars. This rich linguistic diversity was "written out" of history by the efforts of Sui and early Tang phonological scholars, for whom it was most important, not to preserve this diversity, but to overcome it, to create one unified glossing system for Written Sinitic that would serve as a standard for the whole empire.

What can this linguistic diversity tell us about the idea of "ethnicity" in medieval times? "Pseudo-ethnic" terms such as Yue or Li that we find in medieval texts were used in a very loose fashion for very heterogeneous groups of people, and were influenced more by conceptions of ancestral geography and general level of cultural prestige than by the sorts of objective criteria that modern linguists and ethnographers would prefer. Because these terms have been correlated to modern ethnic groups, they have been treated as if they referred to culturally distinctive, hard-boundaried, politically conscious entities that have survived for many centuries down to the present day. On the other hand, terms such as Chu or Wu do not correspond to any modern ethnic group, but are instead understood to be part of a larger "Han Chinese" ethnicity and language family. As a result, the distinctive role played by these linguistic and social groups has been largely ignored. As this essay has shown, once we deconstruct the idea of a unitary Han or Chinese identity, we open up the prospect of understanding the medieval Wu and Chu people as self-conscious ethnic groups which were linguistically and socially a good deal more coherent than the Yue or other "marginalized" peoples.⁵¹

⁵¹ Further research might pursue the extent to which these groups possessed distinctive oral traditions that might have made their way into Written Sinitic only fitfully. The most obvious example is the lengthy story cycle of Wu Zixu, a distinctive tradition of Wu oral culture that developed into a powerful religious cult that spread out from its lower Yangzi heartland in medieval times. See David Johnson, "The Wu Tzu-hsu Pien-wen and Its Sources," parts I and II, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 40, no. 1 (June 1980): 93–156, and 40; no. 2 (Dec. 1980), 465–505.

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